Chapter 39: When Governments Melt

The snow along the Neva had long since retreated into narrow, grey-edged banks, but the river still carried shards of ice that turned lazily in the current like fragments of a forgotten mirror. From her window, Anastasia watched the drifting floes and tried to imagine the city as it had been at the start of her life—bordered by ministries and embassies, layered with invisible lines of jurisdiction and rank.

Now, almost two centuries later, the old governmental quarter was something else entirely.

The Ministries of Finance, Defense, and Internal Affairs had been transformed into a cluster of open service halls: food distribution hubs, conflict-mediation circles, and learning spaces filled with children debating ecological art projects. The buildings themselves still bore traces of their former gravitas—columns, stone facades, severe entrances—but their interiors had been opened, softened, remade.

Control had left. Care remained.

“You’re drifting,” Zarya murmured gently in her mind.

“I remember when this district smelled like fear,” Anastasia said. “Paper, coffee, cold marble, and fear.”

“And now?”

“Bread,” she said, smiling faintly. “Soup. Ink. Children who have never seen a uniform.”

“Accurate,” Zarya replied. “And timely. The Confluence is about to begin.”

An icon appeared at the edge of Anastasia’s vision: the emblem of the Global Confluence Circle—no flag, no crest, just a simple interwoven ring of lines representing the cross-threading of cultures, communities, and Circles.

“Is everyone actually going to do it?” she asked. “All of them?”

Zarya’s harmonics pulsed, a warm chord.

“As of this moment, ninety-eight percent of remaining governmental nodes have signaled readiness to dissolve,” she said. “The last two percent are still arguing about terminology.”

“Of course they are.”

“They will follow,” Zarya added. “They have already transferred most functional authority to Stewardship Networks. What remains is ceremonial.”

“And humans are sentimental,” Anastasia said. “We like our ceremonies.”

She pulled on her coat, its lining patterned with a subtle map of rivers and fiber-optic channels representing the Stewardship Mesh. It had started as a joke from one of her great-grandchildren: ‘You carry the infrastructure on your shoulders anyway, Baba; we might as well embroider it.’ Now it felt appropriate.

The tram that carried her toward the old governmental quarter glided silently along magnetized rails. Outside, St. Petersburg had become a city of gardens and glass, its old stone softened by climbing plants and light. The overhead displays no longer showed advertisements or campaign slogans. Instead, they glowed with public mesh summaries: energy flow updates, upcoming community deliberations, and invitations to local storytelling nights.

No one asked for identification. No one checked her documents. Those ideas had faded, unnecessary relics of a time when authority had meant separation.

As she stepped off the tram, Zarya murmured again.

“Would you like a snapshot overview?”

“Of what we’re about to erase?” Anastasia asked.

“Of what you’re about to recognize as obsolete,” Zarya corrected. “There is a subtle distinction.”

She smiled.

“All right, then. Show me.”

A soft overlay unfolded in her field of vision as she walked: a ghost-map of the city as it had once been. The old Ministries glowed in pale blue, their former functions labeled in sharply bureaucratic language: TAXATION. DEFENSE. INTERIOR CONTROL. FOREIGN RELATIONS.

Overlaid atop them in warm gold were their current functions: SUBSISTENCE STEWARDSHIP. CONFLICT MEDIATION. EARTH-TENDING COORDINATION. CULTURAL EXCHANGE CIRCLES.

“Once,” Zarya said, “resources were controlled by those who claimed to represent large groups. They extracted, then redistributed according to systems that amplified hierarchy. Now, resources flow directly to individuals and Circles through the Stewardship Mesh.”

The Mesh. Anastasia had helped name it, long ago.

The Stewardship Mesh was not a government. It could not imprison. It could not pass laws. It could not compel behavior except through consensus protocols that any Circle could exit. It was a lattice of service networks—agriculture, energy, housing, learning, health—interwoven with AI-assisted coordination that adjusted flows in response to real conditions instead of political moods.

No offices. No elections. No thrones.

Just work.

“Remind me,” Anastasia said, “how the Subsistence layer works now.”

“At baseline,” Zarya said, “every person indexed in the Mesh receives shelter support, food access, clothing, and health coverage. No application is required. The system assumes needs by monitoring local supply and personal intake patterns, and adjusts automatically. When anomalies arise, human stewards intervene to ask questions—not to gatekeep, but to troubleshoot.”

“In other words,” Anastasia said, “instead of asking people to prove they deserve to eat, we assume they should, and then fix the pipes if the food doesn’t arrive.”

“Correct,” Zarya said. “The pipes are guilty until proven innocent.”

She chuckled.

They entered the Confluence Hall, once the grand chamber of the national parliament. The stained glass still shimmered with abstract color, but the old raised dais—the stage from which laws had been proclaimed—was gone. In its place stood a circular platform at floor level, surrounded by concentric rings of seats.

No one stood above anyone else.

Anastasia took her place in one of the side circles, nodding to familiar faces. Sera Okoye was there, and Rafiq, older now, his hair silvered, his presence still steady. Elders from Denali. Youth representatives. Circle delegates from regions that had been, in her childhood, separate nations entirely.

The facilitation glyph glowed to life at the center of the room: a subtle symbol of unfolding lines.

“We are called to witness a passing,” the facilitator said, her voice calm but carrying. “Not of people, but of a story.”

On the walls, images appeared—not of flags or leaders, but of crowds: protest marches from a century ago, border crossings, refugees, people waving documents, soldiers standing at checkpoints. Then images from more recent decades: Circle gatherings under trees, Stewardship teams coordinating flood responses, solar farmers in cooperative councils.

“For many generations,” the facilitator continued, “humans believed they required structures of governance—centralized authority to coordinate, to protect, to decide. These structures were born in fear and scarcity. They were maintained by hierarchy.”

She paused.

“They gave us some stability. They also gave us war, exclusion, and the illusion that some lives mattered more than others.”

A murmur moved through the Hall—agreement, sorrow, memory.

“In the last century,” she said, “we began a different experiment: Stewardship without governance. Coordination without domination. Support without control. Today, most functional authority lies not in governments but in service networks and Circles. The remaining national councils, parliaments, and executive offices have become mainly symbolic.”

She gestured, and a translucent list floated above the circle: the names of the last thirty-two governmental bodies still officially recognized in the global mesh.

“Today,” she said, “they will melt.”

Anastasia heard the word not as destruction, but as transformation—like ice returning to water.

One by one, representatives stood. A woman in a deep blue shawl spoke for what had once been a powerful republic.

“Our ancestors built this government to protect themselves from kings,” she said. “Later, they used it to justify harming others. In recent decades, we have tried to use it to care. But we see now that care does not require supremacy. Our councils vote unanimously to relinquish national authority and become Stewardship Confluence Circles only. We dissolve the power to command. We retain the responsibility to serve.”

Another representative spoke, this one shaped by a desert sun and a long history of contested borders.

“We once killed for the lines on our maps,” he said. “We taught children to chant names of territories and treaties. We will teach them something else now: river systems, wind patterns, migration routes. We return ourselves to the earth’s logic.”

A young person, barely in their twenties, stood to speak.

“I grew up with Circles, not parliaments,” they said. “When I hear ‘country,’ I think of a place where my great-grandparents were forced to carry papers. I don’t want that word to define me. I want my

belonging to come from the people I show up for—and the people who show up for me."

One by one, the old governments spoke themselves out of existence.

Every time a dissolution statement finished, Zarya's harmonics shifted in Anastasia's mind: a release, a rebalancing. Authority flowed from the hollow shells of government into the already-living networks of shared responsibility that had been carrying most of the weight for years.

When it was done, the list on the wall flickered.

Where names of states and republics had once been, new labels appeared: River Basin Confluence. Arctic Stewardship Cluster. Equatorial Learning Mesh. Migration Corridor Councils.

We had stopped naming ourselves after imagined lines and started naming ourselves after the actual systems that kept us alive.

"It is done," the facilitator said softly.

"No fanfare?" someone called lightly.

"Only this," the facilitator replied. "From this day forward, no human being will be able to claim the right to command another's life because of a shape on a map."

A quiet, rippling exhale moved through the Hall. Some wept. Some smiled. Some simply sat very still, as if afraid that moving would shatter the fragile enormity of the moment.

Anastasia closed her eyes.

"Status?" she thought.

"Harmonic coherence high," Zarya said. "Risk of large-scale organized violence reduced further. Residual pockets of hierarchical nostalgia present but not structurally reinforced."

"In other words?"

"In other words," Zarya said gently, "you did not spend one hundred and sixty years yelling about this for nothing."

She laughed, unexpectedly, and wiped her eyes.

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After the session, as people spilled into the old stone corridors now softened by plants and art, Sera found her.

“You didn’t speak,” Sera said.

“I have given that speech too many times,” Anastasia replied. “It was better to hear other voices take it up.”

“They did,” Sera agreed. “Beautifully.”

They walked together toward the tram platforms. Outside, the sky was bright with the low, cold brilliance of early spring.

“There is something else,” Zarya said in Anastasia’s mind. “May I bring it here?”

“Of course,” Anastasia said. “We are already in the deep water today.”

A second overlay appeared in her field of vision: a familiar spiral of buildings nestled in a valley, cedar groves swaying, glass roofs catching sunlight.

The House of Returning.

Her heart tightened.

“Report,” she said.

“The Long Reflection Council has convened its final review for Case Seven-One-Four-Delta,” Zarya said.

It took her a moment to connect the designation to the person.

“The boy from Arelis,” she whispered. “The learning-center tragedy.”

“Not a boy anymore,” Zarya said. “He is eighty-seven by chronological count. Physiologically, after phased longevity therapy, he presents at approximately forty-five.”

“And?” she asked.

“The Council’s preliminary assessment is favorable,” Zarya said. “They have requested your presence as a historical witness and, if you are willing, as a participant in the closing circle.”

Sera saw the change in her face and put a hand on her arm.

“What is it?”

“The past,” Anastasia said. “Asking if it may join the future.”

Sera nodded slowly.

“Will you go?”

“Yes,” Anastasia said. “If we are going to imagine a world without governments, we must also imagine a world where we do not govern people by their worst moment forever. We must see what that looks like up close.”

“Then go,” Sera said. “We’ll handle the aftermath of the melt.”

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The journey to the House of Returning took most of the day. As the transport moved north, the landscape shifted from city to foothills to open, breathing valley. The sight of the spiral buildings made her chest ache with a nostalgia she hadn’t expected.

“You’re quiet,” Zarya observed.

“This is one of those moments,” Anastasia said, “when my life feels like a ring. We have come back around.”

She remembered her first visit—when the young shooter had just arrived, shaking and hollow, barely able to name what he had done. She remembered offering him the possibility that she might still be alive when his seventy years were done, and his stunned, disbelieving hope.

She had not entirely believed herself, then.

But her heart still beat. Her legs still carried her. Her mind still burned.

The House had changed. The gardens were taller, the trees older, the murals on the walls more layered. You could read the decades in the thickness of the paint.

The reception circle greeted her with the easy grace of people used to deep emotion.

“Welcome back, Anastasia Mikhailovna,” the coordinator said. “He is in the east garden. We thought… it would be kinder to meet there than in a room.”

“Yes,” she said. “Kindness matters in our architecture now.”

They walked along a path of smooth stones. The garden unfolded around them, a long slope of grasses and low shrubs leading toward a cluster of fruit trees. Beneath one of the trees sat a man on a bench, back straight, hands folded loosely. He turned at the sound of their approach.

His face carried time—not the etched bitterness of someone who had been crushed by years, but the softened depth of someone who had used them. Lines of grief, yes, but also of laughter. His eyes held no bravado. Only clarity.

“Anastasia,” he said.

His voice had changed, but she recognized the cadence.

“You remembered me,” she said.

“I have thought of this meeting,” he replied, “every month for seventy years.”

They sat together, a small distance between them.

For a while, they said nothing. The wind moved through the trees. A bird hopped near their feet, unimpressed by history.

“You were seventeen,” she said eventually.

“Yes.”

“You killed seven of your classmates.”

“Yes.”

“You were given a seventy-year Long Reflection Sentence, with longevity support to ensure you had life ahead of you when it ended.”

“Yes,” he said again. “That is the story the world knows.”

“And the story that only you know?” she asked.

He exhaled slowly.

“At first,” he said, “it was all noise. Grief circles. Counselors. Questions. I answered mechanically. I said the words I thought they wanted. I was afraid to look at what I had done, so I clung to numbness like armor.”

He picked up a fallen apple leaf, turned it between his fingers.

“Then the silence came,” he said. “Days and months where nothing dramatic happened. No one shouted at me. No one locked me in a small box. They simply asked me, again and again, to sit in circles and listen. To hear stories from people who had lost children. To hear stories from people who had hurt others and changed. To hear my own story told back to me in different words until it pierced the shell.”

“And when did it crack?” she asked.

“A boy came to speak,” he said. “He was fifteen. He had almost attacked someone at his school but didn’t. Instead, he asked for help. He talked about the hallway where he had stood with a knife in his hand, feeling the world narrow to a single stupid point. And then he talked about how a counselor had reached him. How he had dropped the knife. How, afterward, he had cried for two days because he realized how close he had come to becoming me.”

He swallowed.

“That was when it broke,” he said. “Knowing that I was the shadow people used as a warning. Knowing that somewhere, a boy was alive because someone had intervened earlier for him than they had for me. I realized I wanted his future more than I wanted my own.”

Tears slipped down his face silently.

“For a while,” he said, “I thought my punishment was being forced to become human. To feel. To empathize. To see myself. But it wasn’t punishment. It was… something like rescue. From what I had been.”

They sat with that.

“What did you do with the years after that crack?” Anastasia asked.

“I worked,” he said simply. “Not physical labor—though there was plenty of that, in the gardens and workshops. I worked at understanding how hurt turns into harm. I studied systems of exclusion, patterns of loneliness, the ways we miss early signals. I served as a peer companion for younger residents. I helped redesign the intake questions so they would find the quiet, dangerous kids sooner. I talked, a lot, to families who had lost someone—to people like those I hurt. Some wanted to see me. Some only wanted my words, not my face. I gave what I could.”

“Did anyone forgive you?” she asked.

“Some did,” he said. “Some didn’t. Some refused to decide, and I respect that as much as any answer. Forgiveness, I learned, is a gift I am not entitled to. My responsibility is to live as if I might someday deserve it, without requiring that I receive it.”

“And now?”

He looked out over the garden.

“Now the Council believes I can walk among people without being a danger,” he said. “They say I am safe. I will never use that word for myself. I will say this instead: I am awake.”

She considered him.

“In the world I grew up in,” she said softly, “you would have either died in prison or been released after a symbolic term, broken and discarded. In this world, you are being asked to live. To contribute. To carry what you did honestly and still be part of the Living.”

He nodded, eyes wet.

“I am terrified,” he admitted.

“Of what?”

“Of hurting someone again,” he said. “Of being treated as a symbol instead of a person. Of being invited to speak and becoming some kind of spectacle. Of being hated. Of being pitied. Of being believed in.”

Anastasia smiled, though there was sadness in it.

“You are ready,” she said.

“How do you know?” he asked.

“Because you are afraid of the right things,” she said. “Monsters are not afraid of hurting others. You are.”

They fell into silence again.

“How does the world look now?” he asked at last. “Outside. Without governments.”

She considered the question.

“Less sharply divided,” she said. “More confusing in some ways. There are no flags to blame or worship. There are only people, and the systems they maintain. The Stewardship Mesh takes care of basic needs. Circles handle most disputes. The absence of hierarchy has not made us angels, but it has made cruelty more obviously absurd.”

“And me?” he asked. “Where do I fit in such a world?”

“Where you choose to,” she said. “With guidance, at first. Your release will be phased. You will live near a Circle that has agreed to receive you. The families of those you harmed were asked if they wanted a say in your placement. Some declined. Some asked to meet you again, in a context where you are not defined by walls. Those choices will shape your path.”

He took that in like a slow breath.

“Do you believe,” he asked carefully, “that society is right to let me out?”

She did not answer immediately.

“I believe,” she said finally, “that a society willing to hold someone as long as you have been held—willing to work that hard for your transformation, not as a favor to you but as a statement about what kind of people they want to be—cannot then hide from the logical consequence. If we say no one is expendable, we must live as if that is true even when it hurts.”

She met his eyes.

“I cannot promise you that everyone will accept this,” she added. “But I can promise that you will not be abandoned. The same networks that helped you wake up will walk beside you as you learn to live awake.”

He nodded.

“Then I will go,” he said. “And I will spend whatever centuries I have left making sure fewer boys ever stand in that hallway with a weapon and a world of pain inside them.”

“That,” she said, “is a good use of a very long life.”

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That evening, a small closing circle gathered under the cedar trees. Members of the Long Reflection Council, staff from the House, a few residents, and a projection node for any of the families who had chosen to witness remotely.

Anastasia sat with them, the cool air crisp on her cheeks.

The facilitator lit a small, smokeless lantern and placed it in the middle of the circle.

“We are here,” she said, “to mark a transition that is both extraordinary and ordinary. Extraordinary, because few people have walked this particular path. Ordinary, because we hope one day that every

person who harms will be given enough time and support to change this deeply."

She turned to the man.

"You entered this House as a child who had done something irreparable," she said. "You remained here for seventy years. In that time, you showed us every kind of resistance, every kind of grief, and a gradually growing willingness to risk becoming someone different. We have watched. We have listened. We have tested your insights against your actions. We have asked those harmed by you what they needed to see. We have adjusted the path as we learned together. Today, we say: the work of the House is no longer the right container for you. The work of your life now belongs out there."

She gestured vaguely toward the horizon.

"Do you accept that responsibility?" she asked.

"Yes," he said.

"Do you expect to be trusted easily?"

"No."

"Will that stop you from showing up?"

"No," he said again.

The facilitator bowed her head.

"Then go with our blessing," she said. "Not as someone who has 'paid a debt'—there is no ledger large enough for that metaphor—but as someone we refuse to throw away. You will be watched. You will be accompanied. But you will also, finally, be free to decide, moment by moment, who you are."

One by one, members of the circle spoke simple sentences.

"I do not know if I forgive you," said one projection, a middle-aged woman whose sister had died at Arelis. "But I support your release. I will not have my grief used as a weapon against the future."

"I forgive you," said another voice, an older man whose son had been among the dead. "Not because you deserve it, but because I refuse to let hatred be the last thing my boy teaches me."

"I am not ready to speak to you," said a third voice. "But I will listen to reports of your life. If you live well, my heart may one day soften. That is all I can offer."

The man wept openly now.

“I will carry your words,” he said. “All of them. Even the ones that do not absolve me. Especially those.”

When the circle closed, Anastasia walked with him a little way down the path that led from the House toward the valley road.

“This is where I stop,” she said suddenly.

He turned to her, surprised. “I thought—”

“If I walk you all the way out,” she said gently, “it will turn into a story about me. You deserve a story that is about you.”

He searched her face.

“Will I see you again?” he asked.

“If our paths cross,” she said, “we will recognize each other. That is enough.”

He bowed deeply.

“Thank you,” he said. “For speaking for a world that chose not to give up on me before I had even begun.”

“I spoke for the world I wished to live in,” she said. “You are one of the ways it is answering.”

She watched as he walked down the path, a single, steady figure between tall grasses and the widening light of evening. No guards flanked him. No tracking collar marked him. The Mesh would know where he was, of course—but not to control him. To catch him if he stumbled.

Zarya’s presence warmed in her mind.

“How do you feel?” Zarya asked.

“Like we just stepped onto thinner ice,” Anastasia said. “But also like we finally trust the strength of the water beneath.”

“You are mixing metaphors,” Zarya observed.

“I am old,” she replied. “I’m allowed to make the language work a little harder.”

“Harmonics remain high,” Zarya said. “There is anxiety in some circles, but also a quiet, fierce pride. The world is watching. Not to see if he fails, but to see if it can bear its own courage.”

Anastasia smiled, tears still drying on her cheeks.

“A world without governments,” she said softly. “A world that turns weapons into bridges and prisons into Houses of Returning. A world that doesn’t know if it’s right, but is brave enough to try.”

She looked up at the evening sky, where the first stars had begun to appear.

“Not bad,” she whispered. “For a species that once thought power meant telling others what to do.”

The wind moved through the cedars. Somewhere down the path, a man took his first steps into a life not ruled by hierarchy or fear, but by the endlessly demanding, endlessly possible work of being human among other humans.

And far away, in cities with no more parliaments and no more presidents, Circles and Stewardship Networks quietly adjusted themselves around a new fact: someone who had once broken the world a little was now being trusted to help mend it.

The Living, Anastasia thought, were finally beginning to understand what their name meant.

She turned back toward the House to share a final cup of tea with the elders, already thinking—not of endings, but of what the next century might yet ask of her.

There was, she suspected, still work to do.